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First silenced, then exiled, Soviet literary lion roars again

By Peter Gorner

EXILE IN AMERICA seems to suit Vasily Aksyonov, one of Russia's most popular storytellers and a literary hero to millions of his countrymen.

"I didn't want to get kicked out," he says. "It sounds strange after what happened, but I felt *responsibility*—for my country, for my literature, for my culture.

"When I was forced out two years ago, the Russian people already were in despair. So many artists and writers had gone. Was Russia really so terrible? Were all of us rats deserting a sinking ship? I wanted to stay and fight. . . ."

Then his tired, pouchy eyes crinkled—an Aksyonov smile is a startling, all-embracing thing—and the ironic grin flashed out beneath his bushy mustache like a sunburst on a rainy day.

". . . Of course, the bastards didn't give me much choice."

One of Russia's most important and controversial literary figures for the last two decades, Aksyonov [pronounced Acts-YO-nov], is as yet unfamiliar to most Americans. This will change shortly as translators come to grips with his racy and often experimental style. "The Burn," his lengthy, multilayered masterwork that attacks virtually every sacred cow in Russian society, earned him expulsion in 1980. The English version is due to appear in the spring, an unusual collaboration by two major publishers, Random House and Houghton Mifflin.

AKSYONOV AND the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko made their reputations as the voices of avant-garde Soviet youth during the Khrushchev thaw in the 1960s. Generations of readers have found Aksyonov's gritty, streetwise, funny and touching novels, short stories and plays among the only examples of officially approved Soviet prose that said things worth hearing.

Yevtushenko evolved into the pampered, "bad boy" poet of the regime; Aksyonov, 50, was considered much more dangerous although he was a member of the writers union for 18 years. The official reason for his expulsion was the 1979 "Metropol" affair—a full-fledged challenge to state censorship in which Aksyonov and 22 other writers tried to get a free-spirited literary almanac into print. The effort was crushed.

Then followed Aksyonov's erasure, literally, from Russian letters. His books disappeared from libraries. [There were no copies to be had in bookstores; they had sold out too fast.] The KGB tailed and harassed him. One night, his car narrowly escaped liquidation by a truck. Aksyonov figured the time had come to leave.

He was no stranger to banishment. His parents were hauled off to Siberia when he was 4 years old, victims of the Stalinist purges, and he didn't see them until his late teens. Offered a similar deal, Aksyonov hauled off his family to a luxury rental in Washington, D.C. Within months, he was stripped of Soviet citizenship.

AKSYONOV, however, promptly purchased an Olds Omega, accepted college teaching jobs and, without breaking stride, wrote two novels, a film script and several sort stories—all in Russian, about Russia and smuggled back to Russians.

"My former rulers fear literature as much as anything else," he says. "I often wonder why. Are books *really* something to fear? I'm not afraid of books. My former keepers overestimate the danger of literature and believe books can destroy their empire. . . . They cannot.

"On the other hand, maybe my work will mean something to American readers. Americans seem a little bit isolated from the rest of the world and tend to perceive themselves as part of a separate planet. I'm not going to write specifically for them—I can't; my language is Russian. But always as I've written, I see the *faces* of my readers, and I've noticed some familiar faces in American crowds. I tell myself: 'This guy won't throw my book away. He will read it.'"

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Aksyonov recently came to Chicago to attend a unique event—the city's first book fair for Soviet Jewish immigrants. Sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago at the Bernard Horwich Center, the event attracted more than a thousand emigres. Aksyonov opened it with a lecture: "Patterns in the Subtlety of Evil: Contemporary Writers and Censorship"; it's a subject he knows intimately.

A MODEST, unassuming man, he eagerly signed copies of his books, and his fans were delighted both to see him and *them*. Former Soviet public librarians told how their bosses would steal new Aksyonov novels for their families, while the public had to sign up a year in advance to inspect noncirculating copies in library reading halls. No writer had a bigger or more devoted following.

Since emigrating, Aksyonov's erasure is all but complete, he says.

"Yes, I'm a nonperson now. For the last several years, though, less and less of my work was published. I was writing more and more 'for the desk,' as Russian writers say. I could actually *feel* myself start to disappear. First I was three-quarters of Aksyonov, then one-third of Aksyonov. That's when I got fed up and decided to stop, to come out of the closet and declare myself an active writer. I wrote a lot—13 novels, many volumes of short stories, plays and films—but I probably lost my most productive years."

Aksyonov was born in Kazan. His father, Pavel, served as the Communist mayor of the city. His mother, the late Eugenia Ginzburg, was a well-known writer whose books about the family's 18-year exile have been published in English.

"My mother was imprisoned for 10 years in the camps," Aksyonov says, "and then I joined her in regional exile in the city of Magadan, in far eastern Siberia. I finished high school there, and during my last year she was arrested again and sentenced to *eternal* exile.

"EVEN THOUGH she was in Siberia, they accused her of anti-Communist activities. It was absolutely absurd. She never did anything like that, and I'll tell you, she grew to feel sorry she never *had*."

Aksyonov went to medical school in Leningrad and became a general practitioner—"a country doctor, actually. I went from house to house. I specialized in treating tuberculosis. I was writing all the time, though. There is a Russian tradition of writing doctors [Chekhov was one].

"After Stalin, there came an absolutely new time in Russia, a sort of renaissance for us. A new literary magazine had been established, called Youth. I sent them my writings, and they published them. To my utter surprise, they were a great success and much talked about all over the country. [The magazine quickly commanded a circulation in the millions.] So I eagerly became a writer. I had to force myself to only publish one novel each year."

He was accused of being a beatnik. "Yes. I never considered myself one, though I would have loved to have owned a big motorcycle. I wore jeans, that was about it. One of my books, 'A Ticket to the Stars,' I would compare to your 'Rebel Without a Cause,' even though I'd never heard of it. I wrote about runaway kids and love and longing to be more free and independent. But Mr. Khrushchev was told that some vicious beatniks were going to start a Budapest-type uprising in Moscow. That's why he attacked us."

IN 1963, HE and Khrushchev engaged in a publicized shouting match in Moscow.

"I know *you*," the premier screamed. "You're trying to avenge your father!" In 1965, Youth magazine [both Aksyonov and Yevtushenko served on its editorial board] drew more fire after lampooning Izvestia, the official government newspaper.

Izvestia had published a "letter" attacking Aksyonov for insulting and misrepresenting taxi drivers by portraying one of them as a rogue and a cheat. Aksyonov had set a story in Yalta, and the cab drivers of that Crimean resort supposedly were up in arms. Izvestia added an editor's note lashing similar works that depicted the seamy side of Soviet life.

Youth replied with a "letter" in which a group of poultry growers complained about the misleading way swans were portrayed in the ballet "Swan Lake" by the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. The letter writers complained that the Evil Spirit occupied too prominent a role in the ballet without being balanced by more positive characters. This shouldn't be hard for ballet creators to do, the breeders suggested. Why, they need look no further than the person of "the remarkable truck driver of our farm, Vladimir Grigoriev."

Aksyonov, who was ultimately kicked off the board of Youth, looks back at those times with nostalgia.

"AFTER STALIN, our writing achieved a sort of conflictlessness," he says, grinning. "They threw out the eternal conflict between good and evil and said that in Soviet life there is only the conflict between good and the best. Those were the only two types of Soviet men. And the best, of course, would teach the good. The theme was developed to absurdity."

While official censorship doesn't exist in the Soviet Union, all writers must belong to the writers union and have their works reviewed by Glavit, the main literary administration and watchdog for the Communist Party Central Committee. The struggle between censor and author is private and often humiliating. One writer has described it "like tearing the feathers off a live chicken—and you're the chicken." But it was against this apparatus that Aksyonov spearheaded the "Metropol" affair.

He had a lot to lose. He earned a good living mainly through writing for the major movie studios Mosfilm and Lenfilm. His stories had sold in the millions. One comedy play, "Always on Sale," ran for eight years in Moscow before being banned. He had an apartment, a car, a *dacha* [summer home], plus the supreme luxury—the opportunity to travel. After a 1975 teaching stint at UCLA, he wrote a book.

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"Twenty Four Hours Nonstop," about California.

"My time at UCLA was the most carefree of my life" he says. "I spent most of the time on the beach. I wrote my book, and I'm afraid a lot of people in the Soviet Union were seduced by it and jumped on the next flight out of there.

"'METROPOL,' though, was the last chance to open the windows and diminish the scent of the censor," he says. "It would have been the first uncensored publication in the history of Soviet literature. We asked for only 1,000 copies. But they couldn't allow it. They started this enormous campaign against this bunch of writers.

"'Metropol' was the last straw for me, but what really got me expelled was 'The Burn.' It took me many years to get the courage to write this novel, and I worked six years on it. The KGB warned me not to let this book get out of Russia. . . ."

While teaching at UCLA, Aksyonov quietly stopped off in Ann Arbor, Mich., and gave the manuscript of "The Burn" to Carl and Ellendea Proffer, owners of the remarkable Ardis Publishing Co., the largest publisher of Russian-language works outside Moscow. For 11 years the Proffers have run their unique underground safehouse for modern Soviet literature. Manuscripts somehow get smuggled out of Russia, often in pieces; books [300 so far] get smuggled back in.

Ardis promptly published "Metropol" after it was supressed by authorities [the English translation will be issued by W.W. Norton on Jan. 31]. And of course, the Proffers have published "The Burn," plus Aksyonov's other "homeless" works, as he calls them.

While Aksyonov misses his homeland, he has no hope for change, he says.

"To be frank, I was sick of the whole thing. When I realized nothing could be changed, all illusions were lost. We tried to change the cultural life, and we failed."

However, his adjustment to America is proceeding nicely, and he plans to seek citizenship when he becomes eligible.

"I'm getting along, though I still have some troubles with the financial relationships with the American state. It's so hard for someone from the Eastern Bloc to make out this relationship of tax income and deductions from tax. . . ."

Neither the Russian nor the American people fear books, he says.

"No, but the *apparatchiks* are so stiff and stupid. Do you know that during 'Metropol,' they even accused us of being agents for Japanese Intelligence or the CIA?"

Was he?

"What? . . . Never. . . . *Me?* . . . The CIA?"

Again the huge grin.

"Not yet. . . ."